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ABSTRACT

The free appropriate public education (FAPE) of handicapped learners in the least restrictive environment as well as the Regular Education Initiative (REI) have resulted in many states requiring introductory level special education coursework for all preservice teacher education. This study was conducted to determine if minimally required coursework in special education had any significant effect upon the attitudes and instructional competency of preservice teachers to provide for handicapped learners in regular education settings. A pre- and post-test instrument was administered to preservice teachers (N=186) to measure 22 attitudinal responses and 14 instructional competencies. State (Nebraska) mandated coursework in special education served as the independent variable. Findings indicated significant differences in attitudes and instructional competencies after one required special education course. However, results also indicated that state mandated special education coursework may not be sufficient preparation for regular education personnel to teach handicapped learners. Seven statistical tables and Nebraska Special Education Certification Requirements are appended. (Author/LL)

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The Effect of Special Education Coursework Upon the Preparation of Preservice Teachers.

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ABSTRACT

The Effect of Required Special Education Coursework Upon the Preparation of Preservice Teachers.

The free appropriate public education (FAPE) of handicapped learners in the least restrictive environment as well as the Regular Education Initiative (REI) has resulted in many states requiring introductory level special education coursework for all preservice teacher education. Preservice teachers (n = 186) were administered a pre-post test instrument to measure attitudes and instructional competencies required to provide a FAPE to handicapped learners and responses associated with the REI. Data indicated significant differences in attitudes and instructional competencies in preservice teachers after one required special education course. Results, however, also indicated that state mandated special education coursework may not be sufficient in preparing regular education personnel to teach handicapped learners.

The Effect of Required Special Education Coursework Upon the Preparation of Preservice Teachers.

A tremendous amount of controversy has been focused upon the least restrictive environment for handicapped learners resulting in a difficult balancing act as to what placement setting in fact constitutes a FAPE. Several believed that handicapped learners should be educated exclusively in regular education settings (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Snell, 1988; Stainback & Stainback, 1989) while others found the REI nonresponsive to the intent of least restrictive environment (Keogh, 1988; Smith & Bassett, 1991; Turnbull, 1991). The free appropriate public education (FAPE) of handicapped learners in the least restrictive environment as mandated by Public Laws 94-142, 99-457 and 101-476 in conjunction with the Regular Education Initiative (REI) has resulted in many states requiring introductory level special education coursework for all preservice teachers and inservice teacher recertification.

To date, however, there has been little, if any evidence to indicate whether such required coursework resulted in regular education personnel competency in teaching handicapped learners. By some perspectives it was purported that the regular education teacher was the best qualified professional to determine that regular education was not capabable of responding to a handicapped learner's needs because that was where the referral for special education likely originated (Keogh, 1988; Smith, 1988). Even though it has been suggested that regular and special

education were unnecessarily dual systems (Wang & Reynolds, 1985) there still remained equally juxtaposed rationales for the personnel preparation of preservice teachers in meeting the challenges of educating handicapped learners. The most obvious response appeared to be the mandating of an introductory course in special education with state certification standards (State of Nebraska, 1989). Thus the purpose of this study was to determine if minimally required coursework in special education had any significant effect upon the attitudes and instructional competency of preservice teachers to later provide a FAPE to handicapped learners in regular education settings.

METHOD

A systematic random sample of preservice teachers (n = 186) were administered a pre-post test instrument designed to measure twenty-two (22) attitudinal responses and fourteen (14) instructional competencies required to provide a FAPE to handicapped learners in the least restrictive environment. State mandated (i.e. Nebraska) coursework in special education for preservice teachers responding to five (5) legislatively mandated requirements (Appendix A) served as the independent variable over a sixteen (16) week period. The participants recieved no experiental treatment to handicapped learners during the study. A t- Test for the difference between the means of two populations using independent observations was used for data analysis. This statistic was selected due to a continuous population of normal distribution where the standard deviations of the population were not known.

RESULTS

Data indicated significant differences in attitudes, t-(186) = 2.207, p> .05, and instructional competencies, t-(186) = 7.639, p> .05, in preservice teachers after one required special education course.

Insert Table 1 about here

Results demonstrated overall favorable increases, t-(186) = 3.412, p> .05, in composite preservice teacher attitudes and instructional skills for handicapped learners.

Specifically, data resulted in significant increases, p>.05 for preservice teacher attitudes in three of twenty-two measures and in thirteen of fourteen instructional skill measures.

Insert Tables 2 and 5 about here

The mean of ranked attitudes for twenty-two measures using a four point scale was 2.649 (R= 1.795 - 3.000) on the pretest and 2.831 (R= 2.204 - 3.247) on the post test. The mean of ranked instructional competencies for fourteen measures using a four point scale was 1.786 (R= 1.473 - 2.118) on the pretest and 2.372 (R= 2.096 - 2.784) on the post test.

Insert Tables 3,4 and 6,7 about here

DISCUSSION

The results that indicated state mandated special education coursework was not sufficient to appropriately prepare regular preservice teachers to teach handicapped learners required a somewhat reverse interpretation. Even though positive significant different differences in attitudes and skills were found among preservice teachers after a single special education course, it was important to note that such was still not acceptable. With respect to attitudes about handicapped learners preservice teachers remained overall unsure boardering upon an adequate perception. With respect to instructional competency for handicapped learners, preservice teachers were well within the needs improvement range encroaching upon unsatisfactory skill. Ironically recent recesearch (Semmel et al., 1991) revealed that inservice teachers were satisfied with the current special education delivery system and possessed a preference for pullout programs. Thus a comparison of this study to previous research would suggest that although preservice teacher attitudes and competencies for handicapped learners could be significantly increased and were likely to be at best unsure needing significant improvement, upon entering the profession they would reaffirm the existing special education service delivery despite the reform movementnt of the REI.

If teacher education programs were adhere to the generally accepted notion of professional development as being to: (1) develop awareness; (2) aquire knowledge; and, (3) demonstrate skill based upon knowledge, preservice teacher education programs

would have to minimally add more coursework in special education consistent with the least restrictive environment and emerging reform influence of the REI. It seemed logical that such could have been accomplished by one of two fashions. First, special education curricular infusion strategies that used transdisciplinary collaboration and consultation into the regular teacher education program was indicated to prepare preservice teachers for teaching handicapped learners. Second, additional coursework in special education for all preservice teachers in either professional education or specialty studies was also implied. Given the immense criticism within higher education circles about the excessive number of credits required for teacher education it appeared that the former alternative was the more realistic of the two.

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Table 1

Composite Differences in Attitudes and Instructional Skills For the Handicapped Held by Preservice Teachers

Item	N	df	X Post	X Pre	Ind. t
Attitudes (a)	186	20	2.831	2.649	2.207
Instruction (b)	186	12	2.372	1.786	7.639
Overall (c)	186	34	2.652	2.313	3.412

Note. (a) Positive = 4; Negative = 1.

Critical t - Value p >.05 = 1.725 with 20 df.

(b) Excellent Skill = 4; Unsatisfactory Skill = 1.

Critical t - Value p >.05 = 1.782 with 12 df.

(c) Critical t - Value p >.05 = 1.697 with 34 df.

Table 2

Differences in Attitudes About Handicapped Individuals held by Preservice Teachers in an Introductory Special Education Course

Item (a)	Post	Pre	t (b)
Segregation in LEAs	2.849	1.795	8.208**
Family Characteristics	3.247	2.967	2.168*
Marriage & Family	2.881	2.559	2.106*
Impact on Legislation	2.806	2.569	1.924
Impact on Government	2.612	2.387	1.777
Impact on Business	2.688	2.462	1.771
Civil Rights	3.172	2.956	1.674
Relations with Non-handicapped	2.870	2.666	1.419
Impact on Education	2.849	2.677	1.353
Universal Equity	2.806	2.623	1.303
Social Integration	3.182	3.000	1.288
Integration in LEAs	3.053	2.881	1.288
Integration in Work Settings	3.010	2.860	1.107
Characteristics in LEA & Society	2.677	2.580	.969
Need for Specialized Services	3.000	2.892	.935
Increasing Number	2.440	2.322	.865
Program & Facility Accessibilty	2.817	2.677	.841
Monetary Costs for Services	2.516	2.430	.703
Achievement & Citizenship	3.000	2.924	.609
Individualized Treatment	2.784	2.827	-.174
Potential Overload on Society	2.204	2.268	-.565
Effect on Society	2.827	2.967	-.581

Note. Positive = 4; Negative = 1.

(a) N = 186 with 184 df for independent t-test.

(b) Critical t - Value p >.01 = 2.326 with > 120 df.

Critical t - Value p >.05 = 1.960 with > 120 df.

Table 3

Rank of Attitudes About Handicapped Individuals Held by Preservice Teachers Prior to a First Introductory Course

Item	X Pre (n=186)
Social Integration	3.000
Family Characteristics	2.967
Effect on Society	2.967
Civil Rights	2.956
Achievement & Citizenship	2.924
Need for Specialized Services	2.892
Integration in LEAs	2.881
Integration in Work Settings	2.860
Individualized Treatment	2.827
Relations with Non-handicapped	2.666
Impact on Education	2.677
Program & Facility Accessibilty	2.677
Universal Equity	2.623
Characteristics in LEA & Society	2.580
Impact on Legislation	2.569
Marriage & Family	2.559
Impact on Business	2.462
Monetary Costs for Services	2.430
Impact on Government	2.387
Increasing Number	2.322
Potential Overload on Society	2.268
Segregation in LEAs	1.795

Note. Positive = 4; Adequate = 3; Unsure = 2; Negative = 1.

Table 4

Rank of Attitudes About Handicapped Individuals Held by Preservice Teachers Following a First Introductory Course

Item	X Post (n=186)
Family Characteristics	3.247
Social Integration	3.182
Civil Rights	3.172
Integration in LEAs	3.053
Integration in Work Settings	3.010
Need for Specialized Services	3.000
Achievement & Citizenship	3.000
Marriage & Family	2.881
Relations with Non-handicapped	2.870
Segregation in LEAs	2.849
Impact on Education	2.849
Effect on Society	2.827
Program & Facility Accessibilty	2.817
Impact on Legislation	2.806
Universal Equity	2.806
Individualized Treatment	2.784
Impact on Business	2.688
Characteristics in LEA & Society	2.677
Impact on Government	2.612
Monetary Costs for Services	2.516
Increasing Number	2.440
Potential Overload on Society	2.204

Note. Positive = 4; Adequate = 3; Unsure = 2; Negative = 1

Table 5

Differences in Instructional Skills For Handicapped Learners Held by Preservice Teachers in an Introductory Special Education Course

Item (a)	Post	Pre	t (b)
Implementation of IEP	2.387	1.612	7.628
Parental Consultation	2.247	1.580	7.529
Provide Learner KR	2.193	1.473	7.464
Provide Learner KP	2.333	1.591	7.035
Respond to Humanistic Needs	2.784	2.118	6.596
Provision of Direct Instruction	2.376	1.741	6.494
Transfer Learning to LRE	2.096	1.505	6.218
SPED Policies & Procedures	2.247	1.580	6.107
Provide Positive Reinforcement	2.602	1.924	5.849
Respond to Behavioral Needs	2.408	1.903	5.412
Respond to Individual Diversity	2.462	2.064	4.574
Recognize Individual Diversity	2.451	2.075	4.060
Design Interdisciplinary Learning	2.150	1.817	3.026
Conduct Testing & Assessment	2.193	1.860	.943

Note. Excellent = 4; Satisfactory = 3; Needs Improvement = 3; Unsatisfactory = 1

(a) N = 186 with 184 df for independent t-test.

(b) Critical t - Value p >.01 = 2.326 with > 120 df.

Critical t - Value p >.05 = 1.960 with > 120 df.

Table 6

Rank of Instructional Skills for Handicapped Learners Held by Preservice Teachers Prior to a First Introductory Course

Item	X Pre (n=186)
Respond to Humanistic Needs	2.118
Recognize Individual Diversity	2.075
Respond to Individual Diversity	2.064
Provide Positive Reinforcement	1.924
Respond to Behavioral Needs	1.903
Conduct Testing & Assessment	1.860
Design Interdisciplinary Learning	1.817
Provision of Direct Instruction	1.741
Implementation of IEP	1.612
Provide Learner KP	1.591
Parental Consultation	1.580
SPED Policies & Procedures	1.580
Transfer Learning to LRE	1.505
Provide Learner KR	1.473

Note. Excellent = 4; Satisfactory = 3; Needs Improvement = 3; Unsatisfactory = 1

Table 7

Rank of Instructional Skills for Handicapped Learners Held by Preservice Teachers Following a First Introductory Course

Item	X Post (n=186)
Respond to Humanistic Needs	2.784
Provide Positive Reinforcement	2.602
Parental Consultation	2.526
Respond to Individual Diversity	2.462
Recognize Individual Diversity	2.451
Respond to Behavioral Needs	2.408
Implementation of IEP	2.387
Provision of Direct Instruction	2.376
Provide Learner KP	2.333
SPED Policies & Procedures	2.247
Provide Learner KR	2.193
Conduct Testing & Assessment	2.193
Design Interdisciplinary Learning	2.150
Transfer Learning to LRE	2.096

Note. Excellent = 4; Satisfactory = 3; Needs Improvement = 3; Unsatisfactory = 1

APPENDIX A

State of Nebraska Special Education Certification Requirements

Nebraska Teacher Certification Statutory Requirements of:
Special Education Competencies Required After September 1, 1992

"The person hereon has successfully completed THREE SEMESTER CREDIT HOURS of education in special education which includes ALL of the competencies listed below:

Knowledge of the exceptional educational needs of the handicapping classifications and conditions caused by physical, sensory or intellectual impairment, inappropriate behavior, learning disabilities, and or speech/language impairment;

Knowledge of the major characteristics of each classification or condition in order to recognize its existence in children;

Knowledge of various alternatives for providing the least restrictive environment for handicapped children;

Knowledge of methods of teaching students with handicapping conditions in the regular classroom; and

Knowledge of prereferral alternatives, referral systems, multidisciplinary team responsibilities, the individualized education plan process, and the placement process.

... Verify that this institution is approved as a teacher training institution in this state and has approved programs of training for the preparation of special education teachers.